

veneer *v.t.*, To cover with a thin layer of fine or superior wood or other material; (*fig.*) to put a superficial polish on, to disguise or gloss over.
Concise Oxford Dictionary

“...one can tell more about a civilisation from its architecture than from anything else it leaves behind.”

Clark, K. ⁱ

Veneer is a broad term, one that has a host of definitions, a layering of meanings, both literal and metaphoric. As urban dwellers we are surrounded by veneers. There are the literal veneers on the buildings in which we live: the painted and plastered surfaces, the wood panelling, the brick veneers, the metal cladding, decor in general. Veneers can be thin skins, surface treatments, disguises, camouflages, simulations, fakes. Implicit in an understanding of the notion of veneer is the idea of wallpapering, plastering over, literally and figuratively. Hiding and covering up the cheap, the ugly, the complex or the authentic by applying a layer of decorator colour, a patterned surface, the rhetoric of taste or manners over the exposed, somehow deficient substrate or core.

Also implicit is the desire to value-add, to tart-up the ordinary, to give the appearance of a superior quality that we cannot always afford. There is a desire to cover up the banal with the gloss of the expensive, with the veneer of sophistication. This can be applied to the tangible surface as well as to the intangible cultural or political surface. Political realities and complexities can be glossed over. Unpalatable realities can be tidied up and made to look respectable, differences can be homogenised and generalised.

The conceptual and thematic considerations of this exhibition were initially fuelled by concerns related to the rapid and seemingly thoughtless changes happening to the built environment of Darwin and its immediate environs. Changes in which particularities of place and local factors seemed to be being hopelessly outweighed in the face of the steamroller-like onslaught of development. It seems as if the city is undergoing a process of irrevocable change; being ‘made-over’ in the image of a resort town as the cultural and physical rough edges are being smoothed over and smartened up for the tourist market. Things that made Darwin unique and interesting are being subsumed, cleaned up or ‘moved on’ by planning authorities and the other powers that be.

There appears to be an explosion of building/development where two forms are dominant. One is the employment of a generic architecture endemic to the tropical North of Australia that is allied to the rhetoric of tourist resorts and canal estates; the other is the importation of inappropriate domestic “designer” homes proliferating in new housing estates that come in a range of flavours including faux ‘Tuscan villa’, ‘Federation Cottage’ and ‘Contemporary Colonial’. Both present the face of newness and sophistication, the veneer of the cosmopolitan city, whilst obviously not addressing particularities of place.

These urban/suburban developments, characterised by better block, three-bedroom, airconditioned, ground-level dwellings and two bedroom “six-packs” are proliferating, amoeba-like throughout the region in this market-driven economy. An extension of the bunker mentality fuelled by cyclone trauma. The rhetoric of real estate and the notion of the new dream home are seductive lures. The local and particular is being replaced and wallpapered over with a coating of pastel paint, laminate and bright tropical colour with the homogenising look of the super mall.

The desire to develop apace is not restricted to Darwin. This phenomenon is happening world-wide and as Jean Cheneaux states in reference to new urbanism:

In most of the world, new urban space has taken the form of suburbs artificially planned, repetitive and bloated. The almost surreptitious product of real estate operations moving in great uniform masses, it has not had time for successive temporal layers. It is not organised around cores charged with meaning. Suspended in a spatio-temporal vacuum, suburbia is an artefact born on an engineer’s drawing table....It tried to cross city and country side, but has lost both the human richness of the genuine city and the open horizons of the fields and bush it has wiped out. ⁱⁱ

Premised on outdated modernist notions of social betterment through design and lifestyle options, the thrust of many urban housing developments seems to be exclusion. Not merely the exclusion of ‘undesirable elements’ through price structures and more literally large battlement walls, but also the exclusion of the environment and the climate itself through impervious walls and air-conditioning. The veneer of control.

Darwin’s physical and cultural history and extraordinary racial mix, make it unique and precarious as the rate of change and development escalates. Allied to these physical changes are implicit cultural changes; the desire for the veneer of sophistication and respectability leads to efforts to ‘clean the place up’. This particularly affects the local Aboriginal residents as many of the established town camps have already been closed and the inhabitants forced out. Communal meeting places and malls are also undergoing radical make-overs for the same reasons and in the same sickly, inappropriate, vaudevillian styles. This phenomenon is referred to by Paul Carter as “the lie of the land”ⁱⁱⁱ. As well as this, laws are being enacted to make it even easier for governments and developers to remove what little of Darwin’s heritage there is left. Things are being disguised and glossed over. The particular is being replaced by the generic as a simulacrum of ‘authenticity’; what Umberto Eco refers to as ‘hyperreality’.^{iv}

Character and identity of place evolves from a particular response to landscape, climate, historical and cultural particularities. And of course many architects hold these principles close to home, primarily focussing on issues to do with environmental and cultural specificity. The architects involved in this project are foremost among them.

Observations such as these in a community such as Darwin raise complex and thorny political and cultural issues; those to do with culturally sensitive notions of taste, lifestyle choice and the inevitable confluences of money and power. The time is ripe to tackle some of them head on....to "Cut to the Chase", perhaps.

Place and Taste

The artists and architects exhibiting here have all responded differently to the concept of veneer. They have concentrated on certain relationships between the nature of veneers literally and figuratively and the particularities of the built environment around them. The work ranges from Po Mo pastiche, to pop re-presentation to an almost minimal formalism. Some have worked within the gallery setting, fighting the desire to line/veneer the whole space, creating individual pieces that bounce off one another rather than interact. Some artists have made direct interventions into the environment, working site-specifically outside the gallery space.

Artists and architects often collaborate on buildings, less so in the gallery space. The relationship between the architects, builders and artists in this project is not strictly collaboration. Rather it is a coming together of people with shared concerns and a philosophical commitment to explore the complex issues around the nature of sensitive architectural responses to regional difference; to ask questions and offer alternative perspectives.

The materials used in this show are generally architectural and weighty, the materials of construction and renovation. One of the cliches about minimalism was that the artist preferred to shop at the hardware store for materials rather than the art supplier. Although the work is not confined to the minimalist aesthetic, the source of materials is definitely building suppliers. The work is constructed using processes employed by tradesmen and there is an interest in materiality as well as a layering of materials, surfaces and meanings.

Brian Ash's monumental line drawing in steel is a garish, post modern melange of colour and facadism. Camp in its vulgarity, its colours, once limited to interior design, escape onto the exterior of the building. It's kitschy silhouette, replicated many times on the foreshore, mimics the extravagant, Spielbergian sunsets that are these buildings' raison d'être.

Cath Bowdler's ready-made letterboxes suggest a tasteful sculptural formalism, but they hide a sickly, pastel sweetness, a lack of substance at the core, the sugary confection of the dream home. The notion of a dream house is also referenced using the rhetoric of real estate, in the Jenny Holzer-like exhortations to a lifestyle of success and happiness, with no work to do. They float on a tessellated laminex surface, the simulation of marble, the ultimate fetish object.

Bill Davies work is about the interface between the real and its imitation with his use of astroturf on top of real lawn outside the gallery space.

Astroturf is a veneer that leaves its trace on the natural world, impervious to the march of time, but ever so green. The substance distinguishable from its referent by its harsh scouring-pad surface is not the real thing, but so much more serviceable, less trouble. The veneer of control.

Michiel Dolk uses the Besser block, as ubiquitous in the Darwin built environment as it is in the 24HR Art gallery space. He combines these forms with a ready-made Dulux colour chart, "Handyman Solutions", as blocks mounted on a wall of blocks. The rhetoric of décor equivocates with painting, a parodic regime of good/bad taste. As painting/object and surface/support, the Besser block is transformed by an ironic formalism. The veneer of paint on plaster ground both obliterates and reveals the materiality of the hollow block, the architectural support. The boundary between the real and the man-made is also called into question in a collaboration with **Susan Wirth**. Both artists' shared interest in the materiality of rock has led them to work together in the NTU Gallery. The rocks Susan has modified are dug up and discarded from development sites around Darwin, they are a form of dislocated natural detritus. They have a striation and a range of colour that is both formally pleasing and almost unnatural, like a painted surface. In these artists' work one piece mimics the other in an interweaving of the natural with the manufactured in a formally presented exploration of materiality, layered paint, colour and light. Veneer as construct(ion).

Glennis Bibra, Richard Luxton and Kay Withnall have the concerns of architects and builders in a desire to work with the space of the gallery and to use sympathetic building materials and forms. Their series of constructed screens using weathered iron and natural materials references historically accurate vernacular building styles. The piece offers a counterpoint and a stark contrast to the rest of the work.

Troppo Architects audio-visual forum, "Australia at Large", on influences on regional architecture is also an integral part of this project. Their interest in specifically regional styles of architecture has led them to develop unique and appropriate solutions to living in the tropics.

Issues of identity are vital in terms of defining 'difference' in regional centres. It is important at this time to investigate these socially and politically sensitive aspects of Darwin's changing face and to keep in mind the legacy that is left behind by thoughtless, insensitive, rampant development. A refusal to engage with the extraordinary richness and diversity of this place will result in a loss of identity, supplanted by sameness, a mediocrity and a blandness that is at odds with this place and its people.

Cath Bowdler 1998

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- ⁱ Clark, K. *Civilization*, BBC and Murray J, 1969
- ⁱⁱ Cheneaux, J. "Comment" in *Architecture Australia*, VOL 185, NO 1, 1998
- ⁱⁱⁱ Carter, P. in "The Black Stump", Sawyer C in *Architecture Australia*, Jan/Feb, 1998
- ^{iv} Eco, U. *Faith in Fakes*, Minerva, London, 1986